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European rabbis to no longer recognize private Israeli conversions

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In deal with Chief Rabbinate, Conference of European Rabbis' conversions will be recognized by Israel's state-run religious authorities; Israeli group appeals to block agreement.

The Conference of European Rabbis umbrella organization has clinched a deal with Israel's Chief Rabbinate for recognition from the state-run Israeli religious authorities of conversions to Judaism performed by its members.

In exchange, the European Orthodox religious leaders have agreed to reject private Israeli conversions conducted outside the state auspices, in a move decried by Israeli advocates of religious pluralism, who have appealed to the attorney general to intervene.

The deal appears to provide a tailwind for the Chief Rabbinate's domestic fight against Israeli private conversion courts, which it has long opposed, and could hurt Israeli converts living in Europe whose Jewishness is rejected by Israel on the grounds that their conversion was private.

But it also significantly scales back the rabbinate's influence over European Orthodox conversion, leaving the religious practice to the discretion of local religious leaders. The move will also likely ease the immigration process for some Orthodox European converts seeking to move to Israel.

The agreement, first reported by Israel Hayom on Monday, was confirmed by the coalition of some 700 European Orthodox rabbis — which includes the chief rabbis of the UK and France — on Monday night.

The pact also stipulated that Israeli state rabbis seeking to conduct conversions in Europe must receive the permission of the Conference of European Rabbis.

"This arrangement will ensure that standards of conversions are maintained across Europe and in Israel," said Conference of European Rabbis President Pinchas Goldschmidt, the chief rabbi of Moscow.

He hailed the organization's veto on which rabbis the Israeli Chief Rabbinate may dispatch to Europe for the purposes of conversion as "incredibly significant," saying it "shows the Chief Rabbinate's understanding of European communities and the standing of our rabbis in Israel."

"Conversions have always been an important issue, and we need global standards to ensure that those who have already converted are able to travel freely throughout the Jewish world. This is an important step towards that goal and we are proud that as a result of this decision, we are closer to a stronger and more united global Jewish community," added Goldschmidt.

The move was strongly opposed by the ITIM organization that operates the Giyur K'Halacha's private rabbinical courts, which are performed according to Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law, but are not recognized by the state's religious authorities. Many of the private conversions to Judaism in Israel are performed by ultra-Orthodox rabbinical courts outside of the Rabbinate.

"The deal would severely restrict European conversions (CER conversions typically take three years to complete), and would make marriage, yeshiva study, and participation in other facets of Jewish life in Europe impossible for thousands of Israeli citizens," ITIM said in a statement.

In a letter to Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, the organization implored him to block the deal, arguing that Israel's religious authorities lacked the jurisdiction to cut deals that affect religious services for Jews of the Diaspora.

"Once again, the Chief Rabbinate is making political deals, rather than concerning itself with the welfare of the Jewish people. It is attempting both to cement its monopoly over conversion in Israel, and to expand its influence in Europe," said Rabbi Seth Farber, the director of ITIM, in a statement.

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